

Pierre Merkl: Situations, Segues, Encounters

Interview by Robert McDonald

Pierre Merkl is a San Francisco-based painter who draws on his experience as a private investigator to depict "real people who appear only in these paintings." His work will be on exhibit at the Newmark Gallery in San Francisco through February 24, 2007.

Robert McDonald is the former Curator of the Laguna Beach Museum of Art and the La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art. As an art critic, his writing has appeared in the Los Angeles Times, San Diego Magazine, Artweek and numerous books and Exhibition Catalogues (including Christo, Robert Hudson, Morris Graves, and William Wiley).

Who are the people in the "Situations"? Friends? I don't recognize any celebrities...

These are people I created, begun as very quick sketches and developed into characterizations of real people. They are imagination-based as opposed to using models or portraits, or photo-based. They fight stereotypes. They are dramatic, but dispute casting. When I started, I wasn't sure where I'd get my images and tried to rely on various sources—life drawings and media, pre-made images—but it didn't work—didn't inspire me. Photo-based painting doesn't have enough painting in it. Part of the tension in these paintings is the portrayal of imagined, or created people versus photographed people, or even models. They're a mysterious approach to people, and images of people. My approach plays with stereotypes while resisting them, theatrically, it's anti-casting. It's searching instead of seizing.

They don't always look like real people...

Precisely! As in Magritte's "Ceci n'est pas une pipe." Because it's a painting of a pipe, and these are paintings of people. And they aren't constructed as seen through a lense or a tube or a scanned simulation. There's been no makeup or professional stylists; no lighting or photo-shopping. They're not from a magazine or film stills. Because we are always looking at people in magazines and prepared people—rather than really looking at real people—whose looks we avoid on the street or on the bus...reality is elusive.

So I hear comments like, "Can't you paint more attractive looking people?"...! If you look hard at people, you will see these people—my people! *[Laughs]* People going through things, doing things, talking, listening, laughing, enduring, subscribing. We are used to images of people who are *posing*—that's an issue for me in these paintings. So a few of my people are posing, too—those are the irony-ists as opposed to the sincere-ists, or the action-ists. Although, of course, all of the figures are posed—by me.

Are you "dis'ing" photography-based painting?

I do object to paintings of photographs, while respecting the craft aspect. As a painter moves away from the photo and uses it more as a distant reference, it can become a painted painting...each step away counts...like painting from a model or landscape. The quote shock / strategy of doing a painting exactly from a photograph dissipated a long time ago, when there was an aesthetic meaning and the concept of reproduction was being explored. I don't know why Richter and Fischl still do that. Richter's paintings in the 80's of the 70's radicals who died in prison (note: Baader-Meinhof group)--those are powerful paintings--as paintings from subjects reported via these photos. But I don't see strictly copying a photo today as a radical statement, or much of a statement at all...

I pick things up from all over—observations, sketches, TV and newspaper photos...referencing what I see into new, imaginary understandings. I start from head sketches and compositions and take it from there. Still, I'm battling the reference points, news-photos, the models, the directions—the direction of light, the continuation of the linear past thing—now it's like the photo shall inherit the art-world...I'm opposed to that...I don't take directions well. Photos are directions, decisions. I want to make my own decisions.

This era has turned the tables—letting photography define painting. Painting doesn't have to acquiesce. It is the deeper, defining medium. As photographers try to become more creative through software, they're reaching out to painting, what painting does, defines; following painting's past explorations; and how painting creates. Still, it can never make the same marks.

Are there stories in the "Situations"?

There are no stories. These paintings were created as figurative abstractions and group portraiture simultaneously—with some questionable interludes among the figures that developed along the way. These paintings—there's ten—are composition-heavy, a confluence of Hals and Velazquez and Pollock and Morris Louis...Sam Francis even—but no blue...with Gorky...and Goya, of course. Courbet to Manet—with a dose of Mondrian, but with a black-outlined, questioning mouth carrying a corner instead of a black-outlined red. I had been working in a mode I called "abstract humanism" and "Situations" combined that with my pursuit of the figure and portraits.

"Situations" are mostly non-narrative, sometimes even anti-narrative, sometimes with hints of narrative—I needed to mix it up—to test the narrative—exploring Renaissance writer Alberti's (note: 1404-1492) concept of *istoria*—taking illustrative elements to the heights and lows of human condition—the crux of painting. And I never forget Picasso's rule—"you make rules and you break them." Have to have fun with it...too serious gets stale quick.

What is "istoria" and its relation to your painting?

Istoria was used by Alberti in the first study of painting handed down to us called, *della Pittura Libri*. This book set the standards for what Alberti considered the greatest painting, and his concepts were followed--selectively--by many painters during the Renaissance and beyond. In the late eighteenth and nineteenth-centuries, academia seized on the book, turning many of its precepts into rote, and creating what is still sometimes referred to as "academic art." But back to *istoria*...it's the depiction of a deep and moving moment, packed with emotion and intellect and realization...carrying visual impact. Although taking on a historical, religious or mythological "story," *istoria* moves the viewer with insight, ultimate sympathy and the raising of consciousness. There's a line something like, "Showing the motions of the mind through the motions of the body..." It's an inspiring concept.

What or who inspired the Situations?

One Sunday afternoon—it was Spring, 2000—in my day-job capacity as private investigator, I was part of a conference at a downtown law firm—unusual on a Sunday, of course—on the 44th floor overlooking the Bay. There was like ten or so victims of the same con man—some character from down under who wore snake-skin cowboy boots. The victims had never met each other before and were exchanging their experiences. Lined along a conference table. Some were talking

rationally, some were laughing, some were explaining, the lawyers listening and pointing... some were despondent, some were simply excited to be there—really the best thing to be. I took the scene into a human abstraction, pinned against the spectacular view...All the conceits, the obvious reactions, the subtle, the odd and the mannerisms...they were like Rodin's *Burghers of Calais*...

So the paintings were not conceived as a contemporary Renaissance Dutch group portraiture?
Later on I discovered that influence. I had done the first three *Situations*...I was reading back issues of magazines on the plane and came across an article about Alois Riegl—a late nineteenth-century German art historian who theorized that national *Zeitgeists* dictated styles of design, using the example of ancient Rome and maybe others. This article was about another of his books concerning Dutch group portraiture and how Italian compositions have this dominant figure with compositions inside the frame and Dutch painting is more powerful because figures are looking out and involving the spectator. "Internal" versus "external composition." The father of postmodernist theory, they're saying. That book was recently translated into English by the Getty in 2000. It was exciting and it definitely encouraged the pursuit, and some of my compositions. But those rules, too, had to be broken.

Any other historical painters influence the "Situations"—any specific paintings?
Velazquez' *Los Borrachios* is a big influence—the incredibly different people in one tableau—about drinking! Watteau's *Italian Comedians*...Avedon's giant Factory photo...Courbet's *Burial*...Manet's *Old Musician*...Delatour's *Fortune Tellers* and certain genre paintings using that same scale...Daumier, Nast...and twentieth-century expressionism—Ensor, Grosz, Nolde, Dix, Schad...a lot. The influences, the infatuation, the intimidation—my era was so punk, it took work over years to try to catch up, to think I could match up.

Warhol?

I did do celebrity portraits in the '80's—Baudelaire, Shaw, Plath, Dickinson and a few celebrity friends...they were more influenced by Rodin than by Andy—but I do see some Interview covers in them....! But the *Situations* are absolutely anti-Andy. They are inspired by imagination and observations, observed interactions—there is no second-hand, commercial inspiration.

So why cover old ground?

Like Andy's? Seriously, I love Andy as the 60's/70's guy. He created powerful portraits...he reinvented imagery in his time. But my painting has always explored different territory. Pictorial issues are more alive than ever before. Humans haven't changed as much during the past 400-500 years as much as they'd like to think they have. We've grown taller, and fatter, but the conflicts, demons and delusions remain. There's new tics! And the classical and reactionary pictorial issues in figurative painting go deep, remain intriguing...and pliable, and fresh. The Impressionists, cubists and abstractionists left the humans behind in a hurry—they're not easy to deal with—and not always fun. The painters had new pigments—and forms and colors to explore. They left Courbet's chubby bathers behind. Now, after all the *isms*, we can come back to figurative painting with fresh eyes, and a new introspection.

How is your painting technique different from the "old masters"?

First of all, skill level. That's obvious. *[laughs]* I'm playing at it—hey, it's "contemporary art." I didn't grow up in a monks' workshop—when I came of age, drawing and painting were *out*. *Learning interfered with creativity*...Okay, excuses, excuses. Yes, it's been frustrating. But I have worked hard at it...

I do play off of classic, or academic tropes. The color and temperature of the under-painting—sometimes I use different colors for each face. There are varied approaches to painting flesh, and within one painting. There's conflicting light sources—"jumping light"—something you're "not supposed to do." There's hands, arms and expressions that don't logically match the figures. Other subtle, and some obvious things—there's simple but sublime elements. I didn't want the hands to take over the situations—sometimes I leave them as drawings, or just hanging. And they can dominate, easily, because they are so active and visually appealing--abstract, but with exceptional, subtle power. Peoples' faces are what we see, while their hands--their actions--are not readily apparent.

Why are the hands often out of proportion...the arms coming from unexpected places—often off the canvas?

They were inspired by Alberti, by a Titian painting--an Assumption or Ascension. And Fra Angelico's monks' quarters in Florence. These limbs are questions—a hand is a posed question, or an answer, or just a clue. An arm's source can mean mystery or movement. Some started as compositional elements. The odd tilt of an ear, an eyebrow, especially teeth, can change the viewer's direction, or subtly alter the interpretation of the tableau.

And the figures are generally oversized or larger than life—taking them instantly out of standard reality. There's the impact, but losing what Kenneth Clark beautifully called "the saving grace of sincerity" life-scale affords. The over-sizing pushes past that, forcing objectivity, and daring some sincerity to slip through. I've always done portraits large scale—it's a drawing habit I could never control...

Exaggerations of hands and features—and proportional variations—these are the things you remember. And are unique to painting. If everything looked perfect—or *reasonable*-- it would be another page in a magazine you'd flip and forget. Anomalies are memorable.

Are they wearing clothes?

They are and they aren't. They are if you want them to be. I love the tradition of the nude in art, but bringing it into the Situations would turn them into orgies. Nudity is too fully charged. But I didn't want styled clothing in there as dreaded signifiers...so I make up my own clothes, rooms and furniture, reflecting off each other.

What are the twentieth or twenty-first century influences?

There's realism, there's expressionism—pieces of all the isms. There's social and political issues. The racial. The "other." The beauty issue. The feminism. The multi-sexual. The art historical and aesthetic and critical issues. Nineteenth century pictorial issues...theatricality has been something I've always thought about. The Courbet "tableau versus morceau" debate. I can put them all in there because it's a painting. Though the style is based in classical painting, it's still simply an oil painting...only painted, imagined people. I'm not copying a style, I'm performing

a time-tested craft of expression with a ton of influences, and taking several chances. With photography pushing pictorial aesthetics—it's time to put this era into the next perspective. The snapshot as C-print, fantasy, collage, couture—all aging niche markets—rarely in the right hands. All medium. So much of the 20th Century art's content is context. There are new issues superseding formalism and pop-ism. And if the spectator knows none of that art historical in-the-know stuff—is just someone on a vacation wandering through a gallery—why, here's a “Situation”—a painting of just a bunch of people!

After the Situations you painted the “Visitors to the World's Fair” series. Isn't that the minimal, reductivist color abstracts you've referred to as “interior design masquerading as fine art”? Why did you go there?

You got me! [Laughs] Even though I have my direction, it's got to be insecurity of some sort that pushes the searching for new angles. Anyway, I was looking for a new challenge to follow the Situations, which had turned into conceptual figurative painting. So I pushed the concept part, taking a simple thing, to push-pull the background to the foreground and on top of the figure group or a head, which again was an imagined person, creating a colorful-geometric-humanistic construct. Then smack them together for the sparks—simple it seemed!—it had to be simple or it's impossible. Just banging the old argument about reductivist abstract art versus humanistic content—they said it couldn't be done—so there!—your call if it works. And after those rather dreary “Situations”... I needed some color in my life. I loved what they did to my studio-- and the two gallery installations sparkled with them...like going to the New York World's Fair in Queens when I was a kid—hence the title. Weird people and color-forms—that's life in the city.

Sounds a bit like Francis Bacon's battle against illustrationism..?

How did you drop into that can of wax? You're right—he combined some of those same things. Amoebas in rooms—he took that issue to the mat—literally. He puts the pressure of the universe into those paintings. The figures on geometric background didn't come from him, though—it's something that I've always been involved with back to my earliest painting days...still, there's similarities. And we share the same humanistic influences--Velasquez and Robert Campin. And he's very, very Goya. There's a line between figures and meat and walls and beds and seats, which he played with, spectacularly. It's not humans at their best...it's the copulation side...it's anti-human...a very tough humanism...that's one of the paths his anti-illustrationism—and his psyche—took him.

But humans are rarely at their best...

Is only the dark side allowed? So we should never depict any member of the species in a positive light because it might look corny? It's time to give corny a little more breathing room. The irony age for me died the moment it was born. How about letting all the corners of the bell ring...characters with subtleties, complexity--even moods! Humans depicted with the visual impact of paint but with the depth of Faulkner's, segueing into blue poles...

Do you agree that figurative art is “back”?

Certainly it is and now no one knows why it was deemed irrelevant for seventy-five years. Today's figure painting covers lots of styles and issues—the fantastic or ironic, arbitrary or collage-like imagery, dreamscapes and doe-eyed nubile... painted staged photographs. I've been

aiming for the big issues without the history shackles...the big inferences between people--noticed and subtle. Not re-inventing the world, but not capturing it per se...solving and absolving...puzzling and laughing at it. Screaming at it.

What do you see in contemporary art?

What's not to see? It's got it all--the last 40 centuries is a big row to hoe--cave drawings to castaways, a mega-Goodwill of culture and dog-eared love-seats--the dominance of appropriation. The high-low tension, the kitsch fascination, Darwinian-like collections, the hunt for the previously marginalized, austerity versus Baroque...digital image-making--some really fresh photography looks...! And the clever-ism, the cute-ism, the stuff-ism. And the far-out videos.... It may not all be good, but it's all fun, it's stunning--it's huge--a lot of it's in the staging, as opposed to the capturing--staging has the edge, because there's just so much content to use, completion is so intimidating. No one artist can grab hold of it all and represent the world in one piece at this point in time. There's too much. We know too much--yet presume to know it all, while understanding is left.... And if you try to put it all together you'll get deconstructed. Subjecting the parts and pieces to that illumination steals the magic away--there goes your understanding--into the shadows! So we're all morceaux and little tableau... I take things apart, too, examining the hows but throwing in a few whys. I feel more outsider than ever, having chosen the media best at pursuing core truths [laughs].

What are the newest paintings in this exhibition?

Segues--like turning points...intriguing transitions. Moments between people and between art historical styles. They are beginnings, reactions, routes to eventual endings or never-endings. Requesting empathy from the spectator. While the *Situations* are so complex they turn abstract, there's direction to the *Segues*--leading to circumstances that may or may not pan out for the participants or for the spectator. There are lots of little things going on and a few big things. No one's sure where they'll end up. I can put a lot into *Segues*--lots more and, in some ways, lots less than *Situations*. And the *Segues* have titles like, "The Everything Moment"--it's a male and female couple, or brother and sister--lots of history--they could be in a bedroom or a boardroom or a barn--up for different interpretations of their past--requests and reactions. There's humor, relations and emotional content, politics--Vermeer does this in his exquisite way.....

And another series I think I'll call *Meetings*. They're pure spectator conferences or confrontations between the painted subjects and the spectator who is really forced into involvement in these--there's no holding back.

Each of these series started with a few paintings and the concepts--*Situations*, *Segues*, *Meetings*, *Encounters*--came after looking them over. In "The Cleric, The CIA Agent and the Clergyman" three different men are reminiscing and, of course, the which one is which one and who did what and to whom...and what does the spectator offer as the fourth when they meet and everyone asks each other, "what do you do?" Hmmm, that's a good idea for a new kind of history painting...like, "what *did* you do?"

And the next paintings?

I've been warming up another series, "Circumstances". To include all of the above, and then some. Questions, answers--happy, sad--maybe a little more happy--nervous happy. Maybe a

nude one. Though that's one of things I learned quickly when I went up to the desert to perform at Burning Man—why 95% of us should be wearing clothes and all are required to in public. Nakedness is not something most of us want to see in average situations. A “Le Dejeuner sur l’herbe” and Courbet’s “Bathers”. Maybe for some of the same reasons, most people won’t want to look at my people. But if you’re in the room with them, *ya ’got no choice*.

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